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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2878

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001040

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/03/2016

TAGS: IS KDEM LE PGOV PREL PTER SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: AOUN ADVISOR COMMENTS ON DETERIORATING DIALOGUE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Gebran Bassil, senior advisor to Michel Aoun, said the recent deterioration in relations between the March 14 coalition and the Hizballah/Amal/Lahoud alliance was just the latest indication the Siniiora/Hariri government was incapable of leading the country. Bassil, who appears to have considerable influence with Aoun, stated the former general would remain on the sidelines of the latest flare-up, but was increasingly confident the current government was on a downward spiral that would eventually lead to popular demand for new parliamentary elections. He argued that the national dialogue, which had generated such high expectations, was now effectively finished. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Gebran Bassil met with poloff on March 31 at the conclusion of an exceptionally poor week for the Siniiora government. In addition to being on the losing end of a public argument at the Arab Summit, Siniiora was publicly buffeted by Speaker Nabih Berri in both the press and on the assembly floor, and scathingly attacked by Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah at a press conference. The week-to-forget ended with a shouting match between March 14 leader Marwan Hamadeh and pro-Syrian President Lahoud in an abbreviated Cabinet session Friday night. Bassil had accompanied Michel Aoun on a March 30 visit to the influential Maronite patriarch where, according to Bassil, the former general asked the cleric why Sfeir did not appreciate his leadership of the Christian community.

¶3. (C) According to Bassil, who makes no secret of his desire to see the Siniiora government collapse and Saad Hariri's Future Movement dissolve, the prime minister was now stumbling from one disaster to the next. He described the Khartoum episode as "someone looking for a fight" even though he occupied a very poor position. Bassil argued that Siniiora had deliberately misinterpreted the approval given him by the national dialogue regarding the Arab Summit. In Bassil's view, the national dialogue members had authorized Siniiora to join the official delegation, led by Lahoud, not confront it in front of the other Arab leaders. Instead of a united delegation, Bassil contended that everyone in the dialogue, including possibly Saad Hariri, was dismayed by an argument over an issue that, in his view, was already accepted as government policy. He insisted the national dialogue members never intended that Siniiora attend as a "second delegation."

¶4. (C) In his opinion, the verbal attacks by Berri and Nasrallah were to be expected and may have short-circuited even more serious reaction in Lebanon's Shia community. Bassil acknowledged that Nasrallah's language had gone beyond

the pale ("...we will cut off the hands and the head of anyone who tries to disarm us..."), but he accused Siniora of exceptionally poor judgment and timing.

¶ 15. (C) The dedicated Aounist, who has long criticized the Siniora government and Sunni "dominance" in Lebanon, insisted that the Siniora government was in serious decline, with little hope of recovery. He characterized the government's performance as inept and remarked caustically, "We don't have to do a thing."

¶ 16. (C) Bassil said he and other senior advisors had advised Aoun to let the Amal/Hizballah/Lahoud troika batter the government senseless. By taking a relative high road, the Aounists believed they will appear to be a more reasonable alternative. When asked whether their strategy was evolving, Bassil stated the best path for Lebanon now would be new parliamentary elections. He argued that the days of the Hariri majority were numbered, especially since it now appeared they had pushed away the powerful Shia community. For now, he concluded, Michel Aoun will remain neutral, but will point out at every opportunity the paralysis that has set in with regard to political and economic progress.

COMMENT

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¶ 17. (C) It was clear Bassil considered the past week a great success for Michel Aoun and the Free Patriotic Movement. Bassil feels they are in the perfect political position -- with two powerful forces attacking each other, each losing the confidence of the public (especially outside their respective sectarian communities), while the Aounists stand by sadly noting the absence of "real leadership." Ever since

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his return, Michel Aoun has coveted the presidency, but a series of mishaps by the Siniora government and a faltering of the national dialogue process, may have whetted their appetite for even greater stakes, specifically a destruction of the hated Hariri parliamentary majority. End comment.

FELTMAN